DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 858 CS 501 308

AUTHOR Frye, Jerry K.
TITLE Teaching Strategies for a Course in Political Communication.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of International Communication Association (Portland, Oregon, April 14-17, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); Course Content; *Course Descriptions; Course Objectives; Higher Education; *Political Issues; Political Science; *Politics; *Speech Curriculum; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This paper presents approaches and perspectives for anyone interested in designing university courses in the field of political communication. These include focusing on a single political figure or a single issue, focusing on a political genre, focusing on the mass media in relationship to political success, focusing on media exploitation, and focusing on a political campaign. Topics to be explored include the print media, electronic media, political communication techniques, and campaign issues. Several activities are delineated, including documenting evidence and pretending to be a speechwriter for a politician. (TS)

**********
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
**********

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED120858

# TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR A COURSE IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

by

Jerry K. Frye

Department of Communication

State University of New York at Buffalo

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Jerry K. Frye

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

Paper Presented at

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

Annual Convention

Portland, Oregon

April 14-17, 1976

CS 501 305

TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR A COURSE IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

INTRODUCTION:

Like many large universities, the State University of New York at Buffalo has both a Department of Communication and a Department of Political Science. Our Department of Communication offers both undergraduate and graduate courses which focus on, among other things, the communicative behavior of individuals, groups, and organizations designed to produce socio-political change. SUNY-Buffalo communication courses tend to consider political communication as one element of a broad spectrum of elements including sociological, political, and religious communicative strategies, techniques, and behavior. Thus, we do, in fact, focus on political communication within courses labeled "Public Communication," "Communication and Social Movements," "Survey of Mass Communication," "Organizational Communication," "Communication and the Mass Media," and others. I have experienced some difficulty, as others have, with the definitional ambiguity of the term "political." For example, if one studies the communicative strategies of a local, state, or national political campaign, is this any more appropriately labeled "political" than the study of the socio-political movement concerned with the Equal Rights Amendment? I suspect there is no clear answer; perhaps the best answer is "It depends on the emphasis of the individual instructor" or something like that.

Political Science departments frequently offer courses which focus on communicative behavior. For example, our Department of Political Science offers undergraduate and graduate courses which focus

on the techniques of local, state, national, and international political campaigns (e.g., national energy programs), political candidate "image" studies and mass communication, inter-governmental organizations, and others. Courses are labeled "Organizational Theory," "Political Behavior," "Political Change," "Problems of Public Policy," "Politics and Psychology," and others. I believe these descriptions generally match the realities of most large universities. There will always be some concepts, theories, and subject matter so broad that two or more academic departments cover significant aspects from their own particular academic perspectives. I favor and support such a multi-disciplinary perspective in teaching political communication. Therefore, what follows is an outlined approach and perspective of one trained in communication who is interested in designing university courses in what may be labeled "Political Communication." I offer brief, general descriptions of various approaches and describe some specific units that have been successfully tested in the classroom.

THE SINGLE FIGURE OR SINGLE ISSUE APPROACH:

Perhaps the most common approach in communication courses dealing with political communication is to select one political figure or a group of political figures' relationship with a common issue and concentrate on their political speeches. Today, with mechanical reproduction equipment so readily available, collections of political discourse can be obtained. Thus, printed matter remains the most often used method because of the relative ease and economy. The instructor can design the course around a single figure (e.g., a President) or collect some significant speeches around a particular issue (e.g., legalization of

abortion) or provide opposing views centering on some organized effort (e.g., the Equal Rights Amendment--pro and con).

An advantageous feature of the single figure or single issue focus is that the instructor can design course materials within either the historical or contemporary setting. Thus, students can be exposed to political figures and issues developed through American history or contemporary, 1976 figures and issues. And, before someone suggests that this is the traditional rhetorical analysis approach, let me add that historical/critical, empirical/experimental, as well as a variety of analytical methods can be used to focus on political discourse.

As a group, successful politicians are dependent upon effective communication skills. In my own mediational study of Spiro T. Agnew's 1970 political campaign and the press, I became more aware of the numerous statements, interviews, conferences, conventions, and speeches that dominate political life. Clearly, public discourses of Presidents, Vice-Presidents, members of congress, governors, mayors and other political leaders provide a variety of materials for analysis that match the variety of university students' interests. Thus, the public discourses of prominent political figures is typically an intergral part of courses in political communication.

THE GENRE APPROACH:

Another approach often taken in political communication courses is to focus attention on a political genre, i.e., a collection or series of political discourses having common subject matter, but different speakers (e.g., nomination and acceptance speeches), discourses having a common form, but different speakers (e.g., presidential inaugurals, state of the union addresses, press conferences), and a series of

speeches having both common subject matter and the same speaker (e.g., Nixon's Watergate speeches). The genre approach allows the instructor great flexibility in the assignment of course papers and projects that fit the needs of students. For example, such papers and projects can range from the complete freedom of individually student-selected topics to the instructor-controlled individual project or the instructor could divide the class members into groups (e.g., Group "A" - Nixon's Watergate speeches; Group "B" - presidential inaugural addresses; Group "C" - nomination speeches; etc.).

THE MASS MEDIA APPROACH:

In 1976, the interrelationship of political success and the effective utilization of the mass media is obvious to everyone, but this relationship dominates the instructional strategies of communication instructors who teach political communication courses. Although the specific focus may be on the "print media" of newspapers, magazines, and books or the "electronic media" of radio, television, telephone, and film, these are generally considered within the same course.

Some of the many significant issues which tend to cement the relationship of politics and the media include (1) freedom of the press, (2) public access to media use, (3) censorship (both internally by the media industry and externally by government), (4) objectivity in the coverage of political events, and (5) the effects of media exposure in political campaigns.

PRINT MEDIA:

In terms of print media, the most frequent focus in political communication courses is the large daily newspapers. The pages of Journalism Quarterly and Public Opinion Quarterly are generally filled

with studies of coverage, bias, and influence of the major newspapers on the American political process. The association between national political leaders and the press has always been an adversary relationship and politicians throughout American history have been critical of the press. And, the complexity of the mediational process has created doubt as to the probabilities of message content being effectively transmitted from a national political figure to his ultimate national audience. For example, a political speech is covered by press reporters, who submit their reactions ("on the scene reports") to editors, who edit or "clip" the material in consideration of its significance, availability of space, and other factors. Then finally the public receives a press report, but since the content has been subjected to the mediational process, there is the constant danger that the "message" will become changed, altered, modified, or distorted one way or another.[1] A typical assignment in my classes is to have students listen to a political speech, read press reports of that same speech in two or more newspapers, and then report effects discovered that they believe can be attributed to the mediational process. The rationale for this approach is that during the mediational process, newspapers and newspaper reporters in our modern society perform various functions which in turn act to "shape" the ultimate message received by the public. Marshall McLuhan argues that how the message is presented determines the message, i.e., "the medium is the message."

One assignment that has proven successful in previous classes is to ask students to compare the coverage of the same speech, rally, or any other specific political event by two different sources. For example, one could compare the New York Times and the Chicago Tribune

newspapers, local newspapers (in my area, the Buffalo Evening News and the Buffalo Courier-Express), community newspapers and college newspapers, etc. Specific content variables could include the length or amount of space, the placement (front page vs. submerged copy), the number of stories devoted to the topic, accuracy of story, and, if the topic is a speech, the number of quoted and paraphrased material, etc. A variation of this assignment, if one is considering newspapers, would be to compare the editorial position taken by two different newspapers about a political candidate or a political issue.

Thus, this teaching approach's emphasis on the mediational process results from a realistic assessment of how Americans in 1976 learn about political events, political figures, and political speeches.

ELECTRONIC MEDIA:

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt's fireside chats on radio proved effective as mass media appeals to the national public, American politics has been completely enamoured with the magic of electronic media. Even in 1976, radio is still an essential element in political campaigns. Radio spot advertising, network interviews, and "talk shows" are still considered vital to modern campaigns. Interestingly, the "talk shows" also permit the use of radio combined with "live" (5-10 second tape delay) broadcast of telephone conversations. Often overlooked by researchers, the telephone contact with the public is essential to "get out the vote." Most radio stations have personnel in "community relations departments" who can be invited into the classroom to give students an inside view of how today's politicians utilize radio in modern campaigns.

But television remains the most popular modern choice of politicians (consider Reagan's $150,000 thirty-minute campaign speech) and television

is consistently the most popular focus of student interests in political communication courses. One can simply trace the history of former President Richard Nixon to demonstrate the modern politician's reliance upon television. Consider Nixon's celebrated "Checker's Address," the televised Kennedy-Nixon debates, the televised Nixon "Watergate Speeches," the televised Nixon resignation, and his televised farewell addresses to his cabinet and staff. In all these historical events, television played a prominent and key role. By using video-taped presentations of such historically significant televised "media events," lively classroom discussion is almost guaranteed. In addition, this focus stimulates student curiosity about the influence and effects of television in modern politics. Certainly, where possible, the selected use of televised materials via video-tape is reccommended. In short, to teach effectively about television and politics, use television.

MEDIA EXPLOITATION:

One of the most successful techniques I have used is to demonstrate that the subject matter discussed in the classroom is relevant to the reality outside the classroom. For example, one of the criticisms of the mass media generally and television specifically is that the presense of television camera crews (mobile units) either causes radical behavior change in public demonstrations or that such presence increases behavior designed to attract and maintain coverage. To demonstrate this controversy between those who claim television induces confrontation strategies and violence and those who claim that television is the servant, attending events as a sort of public eye for citizens, I have used a documentary by CBS called the "Anatomy of a News Story." This video-taped hour

long program reveals the difficulties surrounding the coverage of a controversial politico-media event, i.e., the public demonstrations during the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago. In order to introduce this video-tape to my students, I prepare a class handout which is also used to provide some structure for the class discussion that follows the film. The following is a typical handout for this purpose:

> Today we will view a video-taped documentary about the "Anatomy of a News Story" produced by CBS News. After the violence which erupted during the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, there were a number of accusations, complaints, and criticisms of the media coverage of that event. Basically, most of the questions centered on whether the very presence of the media people and media equipment created an atmosphere which encouraged, added to, or enhanced the "event." Is there a causal relationship between the presence of the media and the event being covered? If so, to what extent is this a problem? How can the problem best be solved? What are the ethics of the coverage of the news? Who determines what is news and what isn't? Who decides which group gains access to the media and who is excluded? What can you do as a consumer of the media to bring about desired changes? To what extent does the exposure of the American public to dissent, drugs, violence, nudity, profanity, crime, demonstrations, agitators, etc. cause behavior to be increased or decreased? Should the media be regulated, governed, controlled, held in check, ruled? By whom? How? What is the most desirable way to improve the media? Should there be a "watch-dog" for the media? Should the media people have methods of self-regulation? To what extent does any type of control limit the freedom of expression and communication afforded by the First Amendment? To what extent are we personally influenced by what we see on television, in magazines, in books and newspapers, in film, on the radio? What about the effect of the media on children? To what extent has the media influenced you to smoke or not to smoke, to take pills (vitamin, sleeping, headache, birth control, diet, salt, sugar substitutes, breath refreshers), to vote, and to buy products?[2]

This approach relies upon active participation and discussion of students, but my experience has been positive; good results have been obtained.

Another popular focus, particularly when considering political communication and the mass media, is "candidate image" (e.g., Joe McGinniss, THE SELLING OF THE PRESIDENT 1968). The instructor can easily incorporate much of the contemporary literature on nonverbal communication (e.g., the props, clothing, setting, cosmetic make-up, --or the lack thereof as in the Kennedy-Nixon Debates, campaign buttons, posters, leaflets, billboards, bumper stickers, tee shirts, etc.).

Interestingly, spot advertising was a format originally designed by Madison Avenue to sell commercial products, but when adapted to the needs of the politicial figure, it is difficult to ignore the candidate's image as being pre-packaged; commercialized as a product; and sold to the voters.

THE CAMPAIGN APPROACH:

This summer, our department will offer an undergraduate course called "Mass Communication and Political Campaigns." I have designed this course to give our undergraduates an opportunity to study and observe the mass media techniques of the 1976 presidential election campaign. For example, Ronald Reagan's victory over Gerald Ford in the North Carolina primary was partially explained by the "media blitz" of the last two days of that primary campaign, particularly the use of extensive radio and television time. On the other hand, after a clear-cut defeat by Jimmy Carter in the same North Carolina primary race, George Wallace decided it was time to make some major changes in his campaign techniques. His campaign manager announced that there would be no more of the familiar "Grand Old Opera/Country Music" style bands that characterized a George Wallace campaign rally. Instead, Wallace planned to devote more time to the mass media. Following Reagan's

lead, Wallace increased his campaign's use of radio and television time.

The focus on contemporary political communication techniques in the 1976 campaign provides students the opportunity to study the variety of mediums: television, radio, newspaper, magazine, billboard posters, bumper stickers, leaflets, personal appearances, speeches, rallies, local organizational groups, and so on. Naturally, the rele desired by many students will be satisfied because of the "here and n focus. Network specia reports on "Campaign 76" can be assigned to b watched live or such programs can be video-taped at our Educational Communication Center for later in-class use. If the timing of the course coincides with a local political election campaign, it is possible to invite candidates to personally present their views on various issues. Two or three class members could approach the variou candidates in advance to work out the specific arrangements. And, if the instructor and students are willing to open up such a meeting to the whole university, the candidates are usually happy to cooperate. Of course, since the "student vote" in some communities involves substantial numbers, candidates will frequently agree to meet informa with students either in a "coffee hour" or at a meeting of the regula class members who have worked to provide the candidates the exposure they desire among student voters.[3]

The value of such involvement of your students in local politi can be substantial. In many cases it will be the first time they have personally met a candidate, listened to opposing views on identical issues, and generally become personally involved in our democratic political process.

I have used several different assignments and projects, but the following will likely be used in the summer course:

Option #1: CANDATES ON THE ISSUES

Follow any significant campaign issue of your choice. Familiarize yourself about the arguments presented both for and against the issue by reading newspaper and magazine reports and by listening to candidates' expressed positions on programs such as "Issues and Answers," "Meet the Press," and "Face the Nation." Be prepared to summarize the candidates' position on the issues.

Option #2: DOCUMENTATION OF EVIDENCE

Be able to summarize in a short paragraph the position taken on specific issues you selected in Option #1. Now, document your sources. Explain where you discovered each candidate's evidence for the position taken on the issue. Provide enough detail in you documentation that another person could find it on the basis of the information you supply. For example, in the 1976 primary campaigns, what are the candidates' position on the issue of bussing?

Option #3: SPEECHWRITER

Assume that you are hired as a speech writer for one of the candidates. Prepare a speech that would be appropriate for actual use by the candidate of your choice. It should be related to a specific issue (e.g., bussing). You may assume 15-20 minutes of prime-time television will be available for your candidate's use.

NOTES

[1]I have combined the study of political communication with a perspective of mass communication in some of my own research. See Jerry K. Frye, "American Newspapers Versus Agnew's 1970 Political Campaign," JOURNAL OF APPLIED COMMUNICATION RESEARCH, (in press), and "Press Mediation in the Dissemination of Vice President Spiro T. Agnew's Campaign Speeches of October 19, 1969 to November 3, 1970," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1974.

[2]I used Glessing and White's MASS MEDIA: THE INVISIBLE ENVIRONMENT (SRA: 1973) for this course and many of these questions came from that text.

[3]A valuable resource for teachers of political communication courses is DEA NEWS. This is a publication of the Division of Educational Affairs of the American Political Science Association, 1527 New Hampshire Avenue, N. W., Washington, D.C. A number of articles in the communication research literature demonstrate the variety of perspectives and methods of studies on political communication. A representative, brief, list follows: M. C. Morrison, "The Role of the Political Cartoonist in Image Making," CENTRAL STATES SPEECH JOURNAL, 20 (Winter, 1969), 252-260; D. A. Ling, "A Pentadic Analysis of Senator Edward Kennedy's Address to the People of Massachusetts, July 25, 1969,"CENTRAL STATES SPEECH JOURNAL, 21 (Summer, 1970), 81-86; M. McCombs, "The Influence of Mass Communication in Politics," TODAY'S SPEECH, 26 (November, 1968), 31-34; K. P. Adler, "Mass Media Responsibility to Political Elites," JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION, 8 (Summer, 1958), 51-55; J. P. Robinson,"Perceived Media Bias and the 1968 Vote: Can the Media Affect Behavior After All?" JOURNALISM QUARTERLY, 49

(Summer, 1972), 239-246; S. Kraus, "Mass Communication and Political Socialization: A Re-Assessment of Two Decades of Research," QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF SPEECH, 59 (December, 1973), 390-400; C. Roberts, "Voting Intentions and Attitude Change in a Congressional Election," SPEECH MONOGRAPHS, 40 (March, 1973), 49-55; H. F. Harding, "The 1968 Presidential Campaign and Teachers of Speech," SPEECH TEACHER, 17 (March, 1968), 150-155; R. Cheatham, "An Overview of Contemporary Gubernatorial Inaugurals," SOUTHERN SPEECH COMMUNICATION JOURNAL, 40 (Winter, 1974), 191-203; A. D. Litfin, "Network Responses to a Presidential Address," WESTERN SPEECH, 36 (Winter, 1972), 24-30; A. A. King and F. D. Anderson, "Nixon, Agnew, and the 'Silent Majority': A Case Study in the Rhetoric of Polarization," WESTERN SPEECH, 35 (Fall, 1971), 243-255; S. N. Scher, "The Role of the Television Critic: Four Approaches," TODAY'S SPEECH, 22 (Summer, 1974), 1-6; M. J. Robinson, "The Impact of the Televised Watergate Hearings," JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION, 24 (Spring, 1974), 17-31; G. H. Stempel III, "Coverage of the 1972 Campaign by TV, News Magazines and Major Newspapers," JOURNALISM QUARTERLY, 51 (Winter, 1974), 645-648; and J. Wanat, "Political Broadcast Advertising and Primary Election Voting," JOURNAL OF BROADCASTING, 18 (Fall, 1974), 413-422.

## REFERENCES

Chaffee, Steven H. and Michael J Petrick. USING THE MASS MEDIA: COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS IN AMERICAN SOCIETY. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975. See chapters 12 and 13, "Election Persuasion: Candidates and Issues" and "Elections without Candidates."

Devlin, L. Patrick. CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL SPEAKING. Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1971.

Devlin, L. Patrick. "Contrasts in Presidential Campaign Commercials of 1972," JOURNAL OF BROADCASTING, 18 (Winter, 1973/74), 17-26.

Dwarts, Dru and Semple, Guido, "Coverage of the 1972 Campaign by TV, News Magazines, and Major Newspapers," JOURNALISM QUARTERLY, 51 (Winter, 1974), 645-648.

Glessing, Robert J. and William P. White. MASS MEDIA: THE INVISIBLE ENVIRONMENT. Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc., 1973.

Hahn, Dan and Ruth Gonchar, "Images and Issues in Political Rhetoric," TODAY'S SPEECH, 20 (Summer, 1972), 57-65.

Hahn, Dan. "The Effect of Television on Presidential Campaigns," TODAY'S SPEECH, 18 (Spring, 1970), 4-17.

Kaid, Lynda Lee, Keith R. Sanders, and Robert O. Hirsch. POLITICAL CAMPAIGN COMMUNICATION: A BIBLIOGRAPHY AND GUIDE TO THE LITERATURE. Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1974.

Lee, Richard W., ed. POLITICS AND THE PRESS. Washington: Colortone Press, 1970.

Nimmo, Dan. POPULAR IMAGES OF POLITICS. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1974.

Nimmo, Dan. POLITICAL PERSUADERS. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1970.

Pember, Don R. MASS MEDIA IN AMERICA. Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc., 1974.

Rivers, William L., Theodore Peterson, and Jay W. Jensen. THE MASS MEDIA AND MODERN SOCIETY, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Rinehart Press, 1971. See chapter 7, "The Media and Government-The Modern Experience."

Schramm, Wilbur. MEN, MESSAGES, AND MEDIA: A LOOK AT HUMAN COMMUNICATION. New York: Harper & Row, 1973. See chapter 14, "The Political Impact of Mass Communication."

Tebbel, John. THE MEDIA IN AMERICA. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1974. See chapters 15, 16, and 21.

Whitney, Frederick C. MASS MEDIA AND MASS COMMUNICATIONS IN SOCIETY. Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1975.